The five-volume edition of Beschlüsse des Rates der Stadt Köln 1320–1550, edited by the archival specialists of the Historisches Archiv der Stadt Köln, Manfred Groten and Manfred Huiskes, unveil a rich tapestry of city life, particularly for the first half of the sixteenth century. Be it the cleaning of the cesspool or the removal of pigs and wild dogs from the streets, vagabonds and gypsies in the city or soldiers before the gates, prostitutes in places too conspicuous or heretics in hiding, the deteriorating quality of wine, beer, and herring or the rising prices of pork, beef, and cheese, the demands of the emperor or the attempted incursions of the archbishop, jabberers and beggars interrupting sermons or mice inspecting the meat storehouse—all of these concerns were the daily business of Cologne’s councilors.

A survey of the council decisions might, at first, leave readers disappointed. Although the overwhelming body of the records covers sixteenth-century’s heyday of religious, social, and military upheaval (1513–1550), the minutes are reticent in their supply of information. Typically the entries are short, often recording the topic but not the intricacies and results of a discussion. Then, at times, we learn the outcome, e.g., measures to be taken against someone, but not what prompted these actions. Some references are unintelligible to the modern-day reader. The tediousness and the mundane nature of the records, particularly after 1513 when the secretaries began recording decisions of every council session, might also tire the reader. The daily concerns and rulings repeat themselves, and one wonders about their importance in the great scheme of events.

Yet this reflection of everyday life in imperial Cologne is precisely what makes the Ratsbeschlüsse such a rich source. Here, momentous and petty interests stand side by side. Pivotal political decisions on the imperial level alternate with pronouncements on individual complaints and concerns of Cologne’s citizens. From the affirmation to
obey the emperor in the Schmalkaldic War against Saxony and Hesse, the councilors turn to the problem of the city's drainage trenches. The Council deliberated on the most diverse aspects of Cologne's life, including the city's economy, its stance toward the archbishop, crime and law enforcement, and the handling of social discontent. Most animating are the accounts of Cologne's social problems, ranging from sanitation to sexuality. In general, as one might expect, the records reveal the Council's policy toward other imperial cities, the Hansa, the emperor, and its territorial neighbors.

Groten and Huiskes have undertaken the laborious and admirable task of editing a daunting body of material. The volumes contain two kinds of records: the Ratsmemoriale (council notes) and the Ratsprotokolle (council minutes). The Ratsprotokolle began in 1513, the year of the guild revolt against the government. Their entries are far more comprehensive than the earlier occasional notes (Ratsmemoriale) in which the Council registered only notable decisions or occurrences. Regular record keeping, i.e. the actual council minutes, commenced with the political upheaval and was motivated by the Council's desire to justify its actions in the wake of accusations against its policy. These council minutes (Ratsprotokolle) are compiled in volumes 2-5. Volume one gathers the more sporadic Ratsmemoriale and other documents that reflect the Council's rulings from 1320 until 1513. The record keeping before 1513 differed considerably from that after the guild revolt. Frequently there are only a handful of entries available for a year during the earlier period, for some years none at all. The council minutes, on the other hand, recorded every session, which typically took place three times a week, sometimes more often if an extra-ordinary meeting was called. For example, 3,888 council decisions from 1320 to 1513 (1543) compare with 24,266 entries between 1513 and 1550.

In introductions both to the Ratsmemoriale (vol. 1) and to the first volume of the Ratsprotokolle (vol. 2), the editors describe their sources and the differences between these two document collections. For the

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1 V,431,571 [1546]. Here and in the following references to the edition, the first figure indicates the volume, the second the page, the third the number of the entry, and the last, in square brackets, the year.
2 The Ratsmemoriale do not end until 1543, but are superseded from 1513 by the much more exhaustive Ratsprotokolle.
3 The year 1470 with 286 entries is an exception.
4 The only "gap" in the record keeping after 1513 occurred in 1521-22, for which mysteriously no records are extant.